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Memorial Sketch

Of the Life of

Compatriot William McKinley

Member of the Society of

Sons of the American Revolution

By

Hon. John Whitehead

President of the New Jersey Society

S. A. R.

Printed by order of the
FOURTEENTH ANNUAL CONGRESS
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WILLIAM McKINLEY

COMPATRIOT WILLIAM McKINLEY, the twenty-fifth President of the United States, was born in Ohio, in 1843. He came of patriotic ancestry, by lineal descent, from his great-grandfather, David McKinley, a soldier of the Revolution, who enlisted into the ranks from Pennsylvania. It was by virtue of this descent that he claimed eligibility to membership in the Sons of the American Revolution, and was elected a member of the Ohio Society early in the history of that organization.

His early life gave full promise of his future career; he was foremost in all his classes at school and college, and prominent as a debater and orator. His uniform courtesy and his manly conduct endeared him to his classmates and secured the confidence and respect of teacher and professor.

At eighteen he enlisted as a private into the Union Army, almost as soon as the Civil War was declared and continued in the service until the close of the contest. His merits were soon recognized and he rapidly rose from rank to rank, and was honorably discharged in June, 1865, as Brevet-Major. He then began the study of the law and in due time was licensed as an attorney and counsellor. His aptitude in seizing the salient points involved in the cases committed to his care, and his ability as a counsellor and advocate very early placed him in the front rank of

the bar of his native state; but his tastes and natural inclination for a higher sphere of action were so marked, so pronounced, that his fellow citizens soon called him to represent them in the National Legislature. He was elected again and again to the House of Representatives from the same congressional district. In that body of distinguished men, his great ability as a speaker and his accomplishments as a statesman soon made him recognized as one born to direct and lead affairs, and very early in his congressional career, by universal consent, he was acknowledged as one of the great men of his time. He was an independent thinker, but the distinctive principles of the party to which he gave his allegiance commended themselves to his judgment and he did not hesitate, upon all proper occasions, to avow, in no uncertain manner, his opinions. He did not speak often and only when the importance of the debate demanded. His utterances were marked by profound thought, convincing argument and an ample knowledge of all subjects which he discussed. Always firm and decided, yet he never offended; his innate courtesy never failed him; in the warmth of the hottest debate he never lost his dignity, nor presence of mind, nor forgot the strict observance of those conventionalities and amenities which ought govern mankind in their intercourse with others. No opponent was ever wounded by his sarcasm, nor aggrieved by his breach of decorum. He so secured the entire confidence of his political foes, that in more instances than one, he obtained the support of the most radical of those who were known as ardent supporters of a line of public policy, diametrically opposed to that which he maintained. He never resorted to those low acts to obtain hearing to which public speakers too often descend. His methods of argument were of the highest order, his reasoning close, clean cut and directly to the point. Always calm and unperturbed in the warmest debate, when passions were aroused he never lost his native dignity, but retired from the discussion with an unruffled serenity, which disarmed opponents and aided in dispelling the gathering storm.

Twice within his history a nomination for the Presidency was within his grasp, but his high sense of honor and his loyalty to those who had intrusted him with their interests would not permit him to swerve from the strict line of duty which ever controlled him.

In 1896, after serving several terms in the popular branch of the National Legislature and twice as Governor of Ohio, at a crisis in the history of the Republic, when a strong hand, a firm will and a comprehensive intellect were needed to administer the affairs of the country, he was elected President, by the suffrages of the people.

This office brought with it new duties and new responsibilities, which were met with a determination to fill up the full measure of the requirements of his exalted position, and with a masterful grasp of all the needs of the Republic. He became President of the whole country, and not of a political party. The people, all the people, soon learned that a controlling spirit was at the head of the Government, who took in the whole situation, was keenly alive to those considerations which should direct his action for the advantage of the whole body of citizens and was ever alert in defence of the honor and integrity of the nation.

Questions of the utmost importance at once confronted the new President, demanding immediate action, all of vital interest; questions of finance, of the tariff, of the annexation of a foreign country; questions which affected the honor of the flag, and of the Republic. Mr. McKinley was equal to the demands made upon him in the settlement of all these problems. The most momentous of these problems was connected with the strained relations between Spain and the United States, growing out of the agitations in Cuba. War was imminent, but the President struggled heroically to avert it and used all the arts of honorable diplomacy to secure an adjustment; but the people, through Congress, demanded that war should be declared. The President instantly put the whole force of the administration at work to obey the popular

will. The demand of the people must be obeyed, the honor of the Republic must be preserved, the flag should not be dishonored. Other men, with less belief in true popular government, disobeying the decree of the people, would have interjected their own ideas and personality into the contest, delaying the war to the advantage of the Spanish Government; but this man of men kept his finger on the pulse of the people and himself informed of public opinion, and when the nation demanded, he was ready to follow its dictation.

This obedience to the will of the people was a ruling principle of his public life and was manifested by him upon all occasions.

The nations of the earth have learned to respect the honesty and integrity ever manifested by American diplomatists. A new order of thought and action has been interjected into the modes of diplomacy by the manner in which the representatives of the great Republic have met the arts of foreign courts. No man has done more to impress the minds of other nations, with whom this country holds relations, than did President McKinley during his administration. His effective methods in securing great ends lost nothing by the honesty and straightforward dealing which he and his cabinet and ambassadors always exhibited. American statesmanship never commanded more respect abroad than during his continuance in office as President. In the dealing with Spain, with the Philippines, with China and other nations in great international crises, he triumphed in a manner that attracted universal attention and commanded profound respect.

The traits of character which distinguished Mr. McKinley were of the very best element, which can ennoble mankind. He was a strong man, strong in true manliness, strong in his virtues, strong in all those characteristics which adorn human nature. He was an ideal American citizen.

In the administration of public affairs, he was ever firm and consistent, ever actuated by the strictest sense of duty and a severe adherence to

the right. When different lines of policy were presented for decision, the question with him was, which will be most conducive to the common good? Which is honest? Not, is it politic? Is it expedient? Or will it be advantageous to party?

This high sense of duty, this strict adherence to the right, actuated him in all the relations of his life, both public and private, as a citizen and as President.

His unerring judgment, his intuitive sense of justice and of the right, so powerfully guided him, that he rarely made mistakes. If he did commit an error, he was swift to correct; no selfish consideration interfered.

A broad-minded, large-hearted love of humanity characterized his intercourse with all; this was particularly the course which he manifested in his career as President. When his duty as the Chief Magistrate of the Republic did not forbid, he gave full scope to his native kindness of heart.

The people of the whole South, notwithstanding the difference in opinion, learned to love him, as no other President, since Washington, was ever regarded. President McKinley, in the distribution of his patronage, never lost sight of what was due to their citizens. When the Spanish war broke out, Union and Confederate officers, who had been prominent in the great struggle between the States, were appointed without regard to party politics, and the South had its full proportion of these appointments. By this appreciation of the patriotism of the South, he succeeded in cementing the Union by indissoluble bonds. The South believed in him and were never deceived, they trusted him and were never disappointed.

No elevation to office, not even to that of President, ever changed his simple, free-hearted manner to his fellow citizens. He was approachable by all; no arrogance marked his conduct, no false dignity drove any from his presence.

President McKinley's excellencies of character shone bright in the family circle, where the tenderest sympathies of human nature can be best displayed. His honoring deference to his mother, his profound reverence shown for her, his tender solicitude for his wife, his ever fostering care always enveloping her, his never failing affection for her, ennobled his character and glorified his virtues. The crowning act in the useful and noble life of the martyred President, was his submission to the will of God, his humble, childlike, simple faith, which enabled him to meet the great enemy and calmly pass into the unknown land from whence none return.

The whole nation mourns its heroic dead; North and South, East and West, have joined in one universal expression of sorrow. Crowned heads of other countries have united in proclaiming their grief at our loss. The lightning has flashed across the ocean a chorus of sympathy and consolation. His memory will ever linger fresh and green with all the citizens of the land. Monumental shafts will be reared to commemorate his glorious life, but a more enduring monument will ever remain in the affection of the people.

He is not dead, but will ever live immortal to the end of time, embellishing American history and ennobling the name of the great Republic, which he loved so well and over which he ruled so wisely.

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